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ABSTRACT

A study examined retelling as a reading comprehension-enhancing technique. Subjects were 26 urban, lower socio-economic fourth graders from New Jersey (Essex County), including 10 girls and 16 boys. A control sample answered questions as a follow-up to reading basal stories; an experimental sample retold the stories as a follow-up. Comparable forms of the basal unit test were administered to both samples as pretests and posttests. In a comparison between the retelling and the skills sample for the pretest, with a mean difference of .16 and a t of .03, results indicated the two samples were virtually identical in reading comprehension at the outset. In the analysis of the posttest scores for the two samples, findings revealed a mean difference of 6.0 and a t of .74, thus no significant difference was found. However, the children in the control sample had a minimum of 4 years of teacher-directed classroom practice employing the question and answer approach, while the experimental sample had no instruction in the practice of retelling. Further research is suggested in the area of retelling, both as an assessment tool and as an instructional tool. (Contains 13 references; related literature and a list of reading selections from the basal series are appended.) (CR)

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Retelling in the Improvement of Reading Comprehension Scores of Urban, Lower Socio-Economic Fourth Graders

by

Judith A. D'Alessio

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Arts
Kean College of New Jersey
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ABSTRACT

This was a study of twenty-six urban, lower socio-economic fourth graders from New Jersey. A control sample answered questions as a follow-up to reading basal stories; an experimental sample retold the stories as a follow-up.

Comparable forms of the basal unit test were administered to both samples as pre- and post-tests. Mean scores were compared.

The purpose of the study was to assess retelling as a comprehension-enhancing technique.

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It is my hope that I will now be able to serve the children by nurturing them to keep on trying, to keep on reading, reading, reading!!!

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Advances in the fields of education and cognitive psychology have highlighted the importance of reading comprehension, both in and out of the classroom. Dissatisfaction with traditional methods of promoting and assessing comprehension (i.e., basal reader-type questions and standard, skills-based textbook follow-up questions) has prompted searches for effective alternatives. Attention to higher-level thinking, as designated and characterized by Benjamin Bloom, has served, perhaps, to improve the quality of questions asked; however, educators remain dissatisfied with students' reading comprehension scores and performances.

One alternative which has received only minimal attention in the field of reading research is the practice of students' retelling previously-read information, in both the narrative and expository genres. According to Gambrell et al (1985), "retelling indicates something about the reader's assimilation and reconstruction of text information, and therefore, reflects comprehension." (206)

While the "teachability" of reading comprehension has long been debated by educators and those in related fields, most educators have suspended their doubt and plodded along faithfully, either subscribing wholeheartedly to one prevalent philosophy, or following a carefully considered eclectic

approach. Regardless of their choices, they all hoped that their efforts to promote students' ability and motivation to make useful sense of the written word would be successful... and, indeed, many may boast of victory. However, to what can one attribute the lack of success on the parts of so many experienced, motivated, and competent professionals? Obviously, the ability and motivation of a population of students factor strongly in this equation. So given the many possible externally-imposed impediments to success, what might be a consistently fruitful alternative to the traditional, sporadically successful skills-oriented approach to teaching reading comprehension?

Reading comprehension has traditionally been taught using the basal reader approach, wherein students read a story and answer a series of relatively formulaic questions. According to Morrow (1985), traditional comprehension questions might deal with information explicitly stated within the text; they might ask children to infer information based on context; or they might require creative, evaluative, or solution-oriented thought. Questions might directly test students' understanding of cause-and-effect, comparative, sequential, and classificative information. Finally, and perhaps more in recent years, some of these

questions might assess a child's understanding of the traditional elements of fictional prose. Included among these might be questions regarding characters' motives and reactions. However, this type of response has not often been viewed as a requisite to the comprehension of a story.

It is hoped that the aforementioned elements of fictional prose (also called story grammar or story schema), along with the practice of retelling, will be proven by this study to be not only helpful, but often essential to enhancing students' reading comprehension.

HYPOTHESIS

To provide additional evidence on this topic, the following study was undertaken:

It was hypothesized that employing the retelling approach, as opposed to the traditional basal reader (heretofore referred to as the skills approach), would not have a significant effect on students' comprehension of narrative literature.

DEFINITIONS

For the purposes of this study, retelling was defined as an active procedure, wherein students reconstruct a

textual selection which they have read, or which has been read to them. Retelling can be performed orally or in writing.

PROCEDURES

Twenty-six students, ten girls and sixteen boys, were selected for this study. Of the total number, twenty-two were of African-American heritage, three were Hispanic, and one was born in Poland. All twenty-six were of low socio-economic backgrounds. The children were selected from a typical fourth grade class in a northern New Jersey (Essex County) urban public school district. Their ages ranged from 9-4 to 10-8 years old. These students were all reading either at grade level, or one year below grade level, as determined by the CALIFORNIA ACHEIVEMENT TEST administration from April, 1995.

Students were randomly placed in one of the two sample groups, with the retelling sample being labeled the experimental sample, and the skills (basal) sample being called the control sample. The four formerly ESL (Hispanic and Polish) students were divided randomly, yet evenly, into the two samples.

Students were administered comprehension questions

from Form A of the Macmillan CONNECTIONS basal reading series. Questions tested the following skills:

-Predict outcomes.
-Summarize a parargraph.
-Make inferences about a character's motives and feelings.
-Determine plot, setting, and mood.

Questions were presented in multiple-choice form, and answered on SCANTRON cards. Computer-scored tests were assigned percantages.

Each week the class was assigned to read a particular story from the unit, "Gifts." Each story was accompanied by such pre-reading activities as conceptual mapping, writing, brainstorming, vocabulary-building, etc. Students read stories independently, in class.

After reading, the control sample was assigned the comprehension at the end of the respective stories. All of the questions tested various levels of thinking, based on Bloom's Taxonomy. The experimental (retelling) sample members were asked to write a retelling of the story in their own words. Retellings were written with basal readers closed, as were the answers to the questions.

Stories were then discussed, and follow-up activities done. None of these involved practice with retelling, nor did they involve skills-oriented questions. The

activities were geared to other skills which the district's curriculum dicates. All students were exposed to the same follow-up activities.

At the conclusion of the six-week period, and after all the stories had been read, students were given Form B, a comparable form of the Macmillan test for the unit which included the six stories. Again, students were assigned a score.

Scores were listed in the following categories:

RETELLING	Pre-test	Post-test
SKILLS	Pre-test	Post-test

RESULTS

To interpret the hypothesis that there would not be a significant difference in the reading comprehension post-test scores of similar samples of students, given instruction by either the retelling approach or the skills approach, the means of the samples (both pre-and post-test) were analyed for significant difference. Table I illustrates the results of a comparison between the retelling and the skills samples for the pre-test; it indicates that there was a mean difference of .16, which resulted in a t of .03. The t indicates that the two samples were virtually identical in reading comprehension at the outset.

TABLE I

Mean, Standard Deviation, and t of the Pre-tests

Sample	M	SD	t	Significance
Retelling	55.23	10.75	.03	NS
Skills	55.07	16.26		

TABLE II

Mean, Standard Deviation, and t of the Post-tests

Sample	M	SD	t	Significance
Retelling	77.69	12.36	.74	NS
Skills	71.69	23.63		

An analysis of the post-test scores for the two samples resulted in a mean difference of 6.0, and a t of .74. The t was not significant.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The hypothesis that there would be no significant difference between the post-test scores of similar samples of urban fourth graders when one sample is provided with retelling-style (story schema) comprehension-enhancing practice, and the other sample is provided with traditional, skills-oriented instruction, was

confirmed. As the previously-listed tables showed, there were no significant differences between the post-test scores of the retelling and skills groups.

Based on the findings of this study, however, one may derive encouragement from the following information:

1. Both samples demonstrated a minimum increase of 16.46.

2. While a comparison of the samples did not result in a statistically significant t, the mean score of the retelling group did improve by 22.46 points, while the skills sample only showed improvement of 16.52 points in their mean score. This is a difference of 5.84 additoinal points of growth. To speak in "teacher terms, this is about half a letter grade.

There are several issues to consider before leaving the selection of an approach to the toss of a coin, however. Of perhaps primary importance is the factor of conditioning and experience. The children in the control sample have had a minimum of four years of teacher-directed classroom practice employing the question-and-answer approach. This is the way in which they were taught to think about and respond to stories. The experimental sample, on the other hand, have not been taught to respond to literature in this manner; in fact, as was stated in the introduction to this artile, children are typically discouraged from generating extended oral utterances in the

classroom contest. This study provided no exception to the precedent.

The retelling subjects were given no instruction in the practice of retelling. Although story maps have been employed occasionally throughout the year, the use of this type of graphic organizer was avoided in the month prior to the conducting of this study, so as to prevent an experiential bias in favor of retelling. Of undetermined importance is the fact that all subjects (both samples) have utilized the story map on occasion.

Time, as well as number of stories were further limitations to the potential of this study. The study lasted for six weeks, and covered six stories. Perhaps greater gains would have been seen if the retelling group had been provided with more stories with which to practice their raw skill.

A third issue is that of test bias. Since the test is not only in the basal/skills mode, but was designed to accompany the series from which the stories were drawn, it is likely that this is a factor. Unfortunately, it was essential to find a test which provided comparable pre- and post-tests. Perhaps another study could be done which would assess growth via a retelling protocol such as one of the type briefly discussed in subsequent pages (17 - 22).

It is recommended that, regardless of specifics of scoring,

any assessment score assess the subject's understanding of the implications of the story. Rather than place disproportionate weight on the retelling per se (which would only serve to bias the measurement tool in favor of the retelling group), place more value on the subject's interpretative and evaluative understanding of the story.

Insofar as the hypothesis was confirmed, one cannot determine instructional implications based on a demonstrated advantage of employing the retelling mehod as opposed to the skills method. However, one can surmise possible improvements in the actual application of retelling as a method of enhancing comprehension in the elementary classroom.

Let us remind ourselves of Rosenblatt's reference to reading as both efferent and aesthetic (1978). If we do, we will than view retellings as comprised of both recall of the story, and the student's unique narrative that communicates a point. In this light, it is advisable to approach retelling instruction in myriad ways.

However, it seems that the most important requisite to harnessing the potential of retelling is training, to provide students with awareness of the schemata of stories in general. Such graphic organizers as story maps and story pyramids may be employed, but the goal necessitates the teacher's articulation

and explanation of the purpose of these organizers. Metacognitive training is indicated for the students.

Once students have developed facility with the organizers, retellings may be required, which do not depend on any external format; this is due to the hope that story schema awareness will eventually be internalized by the students. It seems that concurrent with this would be practice in the higher level skills of interpretation, evaluation, and analysis, and synthesis. Children need to engage in conditional/consequence-oriented thinking, wherein they exrapolate from events certain possibilities which aid them in forming predictions during reading.

Within the context of the plot aspect of story mapping, attention needs to be paid to the child's ability to extract major events and distinguish them from minor details and events. Directed readings are helpful in this area.

Finally, children need to develop an internal mehanism for self-prompting, so as to gain independence from teachers in recalling and recounting stories.

It is of paramount importance to keep in mind the fact that these activities should never be conducted in such a way that reading or its accompanying activities become tedious or dread-inducing to students. The goal is to encourage independent reading, not discourage it.

In closing, there is a need for further research in the area of retelling, both as an assessment tool, and as an instructional tool. If an appropriate, time-efficient, "teacher-friendly" scale can be developed, and if more systematic research can be done as to the best methods of training students to become excellent retellers, perhaps the use of retelling can become a widespread practice. If and when this were to occur, we as educators would finally be employing and encouraging the most natural, organic, and obvious way for a child to understand a story and convey this understanding.

RETELLING IN THE IMPROVEMENT OF READING COMPREHENSION: RELATED LITERATURE

According to James R. Kalmbach (1986), retellings have been employed to study an array of language-based activities. For example, in 1926, Jean Piaget used retellings to explore children's ideas about time. Mr. Kalmbach also cites Bartlett's 1932 studies involving memory. Additionally, he informs us that O'Donnell, Griffin, and Norris (1967) used retellings of silent movies to study differences between oral and written language. Kalmbach also tells us that in 1980, Chafe et al used retellings to study the differences in storytelling styles among various cultures. Finally, retellings have been used as "recall protocols" (Mandler and Johnson, 1977; Allen and Watson, 1976; among others), in studies on recall.

These studies were employed as research tools rather than instructional ones, and not in the field of reading specifically. Not only has limited attention been paid to retelling research; it has only recently been suggested as an instructional strategy for enhancing comprehension in reading. (Marshall, 1983; Taylor, 1982).

Research has supported the belief in the importance of oral language development, and the consequent need for myriad opportunities for children's active participation in activities involving literature (Morrow, 1985). However, the prevalent type of classroom setting does not, by and large, offer children

frequent opportunities to verbalize. We know that during teacher-directed instruction, students' verbalizations about that which they know is typically limited to responding to teacher-posed questions which require specific, usually literal, text-based responses (Durkin, 1978-79; Gambrell, 1983). This, combined with other frequent classroom practices, can severely limit children's opportunities for active participation in literary experiences. However, the strategy of retelling, when practiced frequently, can provide considerable opportunites for language development, both oral and written.

Gambrell et describe retelling as "a generative task that requires the reader to construct a personal rendition of the text by making inferences base on prior knowledge," (1986). Astington and Olson (1988) state that retelling allows the reader to reflect on the text and to make distinctions between what a text says, its meaning, and the author's intention.

Though there is hardly an overabundance of literature on retelling as a comprehension-promoting strategy, there is a solid theoretical body which supports exactly that. Morrow (1985) proposed that retelling would also serve to improve a child's oral language generally, and her/his

concept of story specifically.

One of the underlying assumptions of this study is the belief in the importance of oral language development in supporting and improving reading comprehension. Another is the belief that the ability to reconstruct (i.e., view pictures of events from a previously-read story and, through recall, place them in sequential order) facilitates comprehension. This arranging of events promotes development of an internal representation of the story. This not only creates a schema for the specific story, but provides an opportunity for the creation of, or addition to, a generalized story schema, or story grammar. In most cases, direct instruction in the elements of stories would be necessary; otherwise, the student would rely on direct, sequential memory of the story. While this would certainly not impede comprehension of recall, research suggests that having a mental schema into which to fit the elements of a story facilitates both comprehension and recall to a greater degree. According to Morrow (1985), Bowman (1981), Gordon and Braun (1982), and Spiegel and Whaley (1980) trained children in story schema awareness. As a result, their comprehension improved significantly.

According to Mandler and Johnson (1977), Rumelhart (1975), Thorndyke (1977), and others, story structures are based upon

an analysis of well-formed stories, all of which contain the following components:

-Setting: time, place, characters

-Theme: beginning event that causes the main character to react, form a goal, or face a problem

-Plot episodes: events in which the main character attempts to attain the goal or solve the problem

-Resolution: the attainment of the goal or solution and the ending, which may have long-term consequences

(As cited by Morrow, 1985.)

In a 1976 study, Bower found that children who are not familiar with story structure tell less cohesive, less sequential, and less organized stories than do their counterparts who are aware of story structure. Furthermore, their retelling show gaps and oversights of events (Morrow, 1985).

If retelling is to be employed in a diagnostic or instructional setting, there needs to be a method for assessing these retellings. In the 1980's, several authors proposed methods of analyzing and assessing retellings.

Irwin and Mitchell (1983) asked the following questions:

(1) What characteristics of a retelling distinguish different levels of understanding of the text?

(2) Which retellings are superior - those in which the reader restates the passage content in accurate, precise detail, or those in which the reader makes in-depth generalizations about life as s/he summarizes the content?

According to Kalmbach, research in the fields of cognitive psychology, linguistics, and literary criticism has yielded three distinct approaches to the assessment of retellings. They are as follows:

(1) **Assessment of recall**: Using one of a number of point systems, these allow the evaluator to compare retellings to an analysis of the original story.

(2) **Analyses of organizing strategies**: These focus on how a retelling is organized as a text in itself, independent of the original story.

(3) **Whole readings**: These assess retellings holistically. (p. 120)

Assessment of Recall

Mandler and Johnson (1977) and Stein and Glenn (1979) conducted respective studies, each of which yielded a specific, point-based protocol. However, James Kalmbach (1986) described both systems as far too oriented to psychological studies and laboratory application to be practical in classroom settings.

Goodman and Burke (1972) created a system wherein the reader creates a "retelling outline" by mapping events and characters from the story. Points are assigned according to a protocol.

While systems which are exclusively point-based offer ease of assessment, systematic assessment, and efficiency of record-keeping, they fall short in that they do not provide insight into each student's specific recall and interpretations. Nor do they take into account the student's grasp of the story as a whole entity, which is comprised of essential parts (i.e., story grammar).

In response to the shortcomings of the aforementioned approaches, Pi Irwin and Judy Nichols Mitchell (1983) developed a set of point-based criteria by which to assess retellings. However, it is distinguishable from the others not only by differences in its rating system, but also by the fact that it is a holistic model of evaluation. It provides a matrix, which requires attention to students' generalizations beyond the text; summarizing statements; major points; supporting details; and supplementations. Also included are the qualities of completeness, coherence, and comprehensibility (395).

In a study which they conducted in order to check the validity of their rating system, they asked graduate reading students (all teachers) to evaluate 48 retellings. When the graduate students were trained in the application of the system, 87.5% agreement was acheived in assigning identical

score levels to the retellings. When accepting ratings of plus or minus one grade level as indicating agreement, 100% agreement was acheived. (1983)

In summary, Irwin and Nichols viewed a retelling as "a tapestry which, while composed of many different colored strands, can be properly viewed and appreciated only in its totality" (393).

Organizing Strategies

James Kalmbach advocates using the sociolinguistic theory of William Labov et al (1972). This focuses on "the evaluative language students use in a retelling, devices such as futures, negatives, comparisons, conditionals, etc., and sentences which report two actions as happening simultaneously. Such evaluative language...provides clues about which events students felt were central to the original story and ultimately what they saw as the 'point of the story'" (330). This framework is compatible with the studies and conclusions of Louise Rosenblatt (1978), wherein she offers the ideas that both text and reader are essential elements of literature, and therefore, true reading takes place only when a series of transactions occurs between these two elements.

Whole Readings

When teachers employ assessments of recall and analyses

of organizing strategies, they analyze the texts which the students have created in their retellings. However, these approaches are not designed to tell about the digressions from the actual story which have been made by the students; rather, they are designed to tell a great deal about the reading strategies which the students have employed.

Some methods involve assigning one number, from 1 to 7, (1 signifies a rating of "poor," and 7 signifies "excellent") (Weaver, 1981). Irwin and Mitchell's previously-described method uses a continuum of "richness" (1983). Flynn (1983) conducted a study whereby she analyzed reader-response literary criticism; responses were sorted into degrees of dominance between reader and text (Kalmbach,1986).

James Kalmbach, who at this juncture appears to have spent the most time of all researchers analyzing approaches to rating retellings so as to arrive at some level of standardization, has stated that "Teachers should uses a method for assessing retellings that combines at least an analytic approach (as in the former two) with a holistic one," (124).

At this point, very few studies have been published which evaluate the effectiveness of retelling as a strategy to improve reading comprehension. Most of the studies conducted heretofore have been concerned with activities such as role playing and

readers' theater, which have characteristics similar to retelling. However, there have been very few studies comparing retelling and traditional (skills-based) questioning as competing approaches to teaching reading comprehension.

When viewing the literature upon which this study is based, two names prevail: Lesley Mandel Morrow and Linda B. Gambrell et al.

In 1985, Gambrell, Pfeiffer, and Wilson conducted a study in which 93 fourth graders were randomly assigned to one of two treatment conditions: retelling or illustrating. Students in the former sample were instructed to retell the story, focusing on the major events. The latter were instructed to depict major events via illustration. All subjects participated in one test session and four training sessions. There was no questioning used in the study. There was also no direct instruction in retelling. Subjects were simply encouraged to to focus on silently reading the passage and determining its major ideas and supporting details. Retellings were completed in written form.

Students were met individually for the testing session. Each first silently read the test passage, and then completed the important idea and supporting details outline. Each subject was then asked to retell the passage information. This

task was labeled delayed free recall. Upon completion of these, the subjects answered 20 cued recall questions (so labeled). All responses were recorded on tape, and then transcribed.

Scoring of the free recalls was done based upon Spencer's prose scoring system (1973). This system utilizes nine categories: agent, action, modifier, where, when, how, why, belongs to, conjoining, and proposed action or event (Gambrell et al, 1985). The 20-item cued recall test was graded on a standard percentage basis. Questions were both literal and inferential.

This study aimed at examining the effects of retelling upon the reading comprehension of young children. Within the study, the retelling sample performed better than did the illustrating sample on all measures of comprehension. Differences were significant. The results of the study suggest that retelling is a highly potent generative learning strategy, which has direct, beneficial consequences on children's processing of textual information (Gambrell et al, 1985).

In 1991, Gambrell, Koskinen, and Kapinus investigated the effects of practice in retelling on the prose comprehension of an evenly-mixed sample of proficient and less-proficient

fourth-graders. Subjects were assigned, by proficiency level, to one of four story-order conditions. At each of the four sessions, the subjects silently read a story and rendered a free-recall. No explicit teacher instruction was given. At the conclusion of the first and fourth session, subjects responded to an eight-item cued-recall assessment. Analysis of the free protocols and the responses to cued-recall questions revealed that practice in retelling across only four sessions resulted in significant increases in the number of propositions recalled, and the number of cued-recall questions answered correctly for both proficient and less-proficient readers. Practice in retelling resulted in significant improvements in the quality and quantity of the retellings of proficient and less-proficient readers (356).

In 1985, Morrow conducted three studies involving emergent readers (kindergarteners) and retelling. In the first study, which resembled that done by Gambrell et al in the same year, a sample of four public kindergarten classes with and average of 15 students, mean age 5.7 years, of the middle class, with a broad spectrum of ability levels, was used for the first study. Pre- and post-tests were designed and administered. Questions involved story structure, setting, theme, plot, episode, and resolution, as well as more "traditional" questions, including

literal, inferential, and critical types. Stories were read to randomly-created sample and control groups, which were statisticlly similar at the outset.

Children in the control sample were told to draw pictures about the story, and those in the experimental sample were asked to retell the stories. The experimental (retelling) sample demonstrated a significant improvement over the control group for total comprehension test scores.

The second Morrow (1985) study involved 82 children reading eight stories over eight weeks. Techniques were similar to those employed in the previously-discussed study; however, this time adults guided the students in retelling by focusing them on the stories' structural frameworks. The pre- and post-tests focused, as before, on "traditional" (skills) and structurally-based questions.

Significant improvements were seen in the experimental group's ability to respond to both traditional and structure-based questions; additionally, improvement was seen in the level of syntactic complexity of their narratives.

A third study by Morrow (1985) used a directed reading activity format for stories. Children were placed in statistically similar groups, as follows:

A. Discussion of structural elements of stories preceded and followed the reading of stories by an adult.

B. "Traditional" questions preceded and followed story presentation by an adult.

C. Stories were preceded and followed by the question types listed in A and B, above.

D. Stories were read to the group by an adult, with no preparatory or follow-up questions and activities.

An analysis of scores demonstrated that the "combined" group (referred to above as "C") made the greatest gains in both traditional and structural questions. All three groups (A,B, and C) showed significant improvement over the control group (D).

In 1990, Cynthia Bastianelli employed a variety of techniques involving retelling with her secondary school students. In an otherwise difficult setting, she met with limited success in enhancing their ability to comprehend literature.

The aforementioned studies for the most part indicate the need not only for practice with retelling, but also for teacher to observe the following practices, as taken from Morrow (1985), within the context of using retelling to enhance reading comprehension:

1. Encourage and permit retelling.

2. Guide children's retellings with prompts based on story structures.

3. Prompt retellings generally.

4. Use questions such as "What happened next?" to assist students.

5. Ask appropriate questions and lead pertinent discussion both before and after reading. Include both the traditional types, i.e., literal, interpretative, and critical, as well as the structural (setting, theme, plot, resolution) (874).

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APPENDIX
READING SELECTIONS FROM THE BASAL SERIES

1. Bornstein, Ruth. "The Dancing Man." 324-33.
2. Cleary, Beverly. "Beezus and Her Little Sister." 288-301.
3. Cohen, Barbara. "Thank You, Jackie Robinson." 338-54.
4. Coutant, Helen. "The Gift." 356-70.
5. Mohr, Nicholasa. "Felita." 308-21.
6. Pinkwater, Manus. "Blue Moose." 274-84.

***BASAL SERIES** Sketches (1989). New York, NY: Macmillan.
All stories taken from Unit 3.
Pre-test: Unit 3 Assessment, Form A
Post-test: Unit 3 Assessment, Form B